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(54) Method and apparatus for processing photographic material

(57) The method and apparatus supplies processing solution directly to the surface of a web of sensitised material (6) by means of a movable applicator (1). The web and applicator are moved relative to each other to

enable good mixing of the solution on the surface. The movable applicators can be moved in and out of contact with the material as required so that the process can be varied.

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Description

Field of the Invention

- 5 [0001] This invention relates to photographic processing and is more particularly concerned with the application of photographic processing solutions to the material to be processed.

Background of the Invention

- 10 [0002] It is known to apply processing solutions to the material to be processed by passing the material through a number of tanks and reservoirs containing the required solutions. Such arrangements require large volumes of processing solutions in order to operate effectively. This means that the processing solutions used need to be stable for relatively long periods of time. It is also difficult to vary the process cycle.
- 15 [0003] To overcome the necessity of maintaining large tanks of relatively unstable solution further methods were developed in which the solutions are applied to the surface of the material being processed. In this method the processing chemicals required can be kept separately until just before they are needed.

Problem to be solved by the Invention

- 20 [0004] It is an objective of the invention to provide satisfactory processing of colour film or paper without the need for large tanks (2 litres or more) as used in conventional processing. This objective can be achieved by applying small volumes of processing solution directly to the surface of the photographic material. This method however has several attendant problems which must be solved in order to make such surface application practical. The problems found with surface application are that processing is not uniform if small volumes are used, processing is slow because there is
- 25 no agitation after application of the solution and the chemical consumption is high because there is no mixing of the solution.
- [0005] It is an object of the invention to provide a method and apparatus which overcome the problems mentioned above.

Summary of the Invention

- [0006] According to the present invention there is provided a method of processing light sensitive material, the method comprising the steps of applying a fixed volume of processing solution to the surface of the material to be processed by means of at least one movable applicator and moving the applicator and the material relative to each other to enable
- 35 mixing of the solution on the surface, the at least one applicator being movable from a position in contact with the material to a position out of contact with the material such that the process cycle can be varied.
- [0007] The invention further provides an apparatus for processing light sensitive material, the apparatus comprising at least one movable applicator for applying a fixed volume of processing solution to the surface of the material to be processed, means for moving the applicator and the material relative to each other to enable mixing of the solution on the surface, and means for moving the at least one applicator from a position in contact with the material to a position
- 40 out of contact with the material such that the process cycle can be varied.

Advantageous Effect of the Invention

- 45 [0008] The invention described overcomes the problems of the prior art and provides a practical surface application method. The method is called "dynamic surface application" in which mixing of the applied solution occurs during the whole process time.
- [0009] The invention provides a method of high agitation whilst still providing good uniformity. It is particularly suitable for "single use" chemistry where the solution is not reused.
- 50 [0010] The method provides a process which can accommodate any process cycle. The process cycle can be varied almost instantly by changing the number of applicators for a given stage of the process by moving the applicators in and out of contact with the surface of the material being processed. More than one applicator can be used for each stage of the process or a single applicator can be used for all the solutions in the process. The method is equally applicable to film and paper and these materials can be processed in the same processor.
- 55 [0011] Both the solution and the web of material can be heated to a higher temperature than is possible using a large tank of solution. This allows more rapid processing to take place. Furthermore, since only small volumes of solution are required for each stage of the process unstable processing solutions may be used.
- [0012] The above and other objects, features and advantages of the present invention will become apparent from

the following description of preferred embodiments, in connection with the accompanying drawings, in which:

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0013]

Figure 1a is a schematic view of one method of moving the applicator member into and out of contact with the material;

Figure 1b is a schematic view of a second method of moving the applicator member into and out of contact with the material;

Figure 2 is a schematic view of a first embodiment of the invention;

Figure 3 is a schematic view of a second embodiment of the invention;

Figure 4 is a graph showing the results of a second example of the invention;

Figure 5 is a graph showing the results of a third example of the invention;

Figure 6 is a schematic view of a third method of moving the applicator member into and out of contact with the material;

Figure 7 is a schematic view of a fourth method of moving the applicator member into and out of contact with the material;

Figure 8a is a schematic plan view of a number of applicators for use with the invention; and

Figure 8b is a side view of a number of applicators for use with the invention.

Detailed Description of the Invention

[0014] Figure 1a shows a schematic cross-sectional view of one method of moving the applicator member into and out of contact with the material.

[0015] A movable applicator head 1 is positioned in contact with a web of sensitised material 6 to be processed. The material may be film or paper. The applicator head 1 comprises a pad of absorbent material which is enclosed in a shell. The shell may enclose the whole pad with the exception of the front face, which is to contact the sensitised material. The pad may be made of any material which will not cause damage to the sensitised material, for example only, foam, sponge or felt. The shell may be made of a plastics material. In the embodiment illustrated a feed pipe 2 is in connection with the rear of the applicator head. The other end of the feed pipe is connected to a reservoir of processing solution, not shown. It is not essential that the solution is provided to the rear of the applicator head 1. The solution may be supplied to the pad by any suitable means, such as by dipping the pad in a reservoir of the solution. An overflow tray 5 is positioned below the web of material.

[0016] In operation, the applicator 1 is brought into contact with the surface of the sensitised material 6. The applicator 1 contacts the surface of the sensitised material across its width. In the embodiment illustrated the processing solution is fed through the feed pipe 2 to the applicator from the reservoir. The applicator 1 supplies a controlled amount of processing solution to the surface of the material 6. The applicator moves backwards and forwards along the length of the material. The processing solutions are thus spread on the surface of the material and mixed so that seasoning effects are distributed in a manner similar to that of a conventional deep tank processor. The processing solution can be supplied either in concentrated single use form or in dilute form. Excess solution is collected in tray 5. The web of material 6 may be either stationary or moving during the process.

[0017] The applicator 1 is moved into and out of contact with the sensitised material 6 as required. In the embodiment shown in figure 1a the applicator head is retracted out of contact with material 6 to the position shown by dotted lines. Figure 1b shows an applicator 1 which is moved out of contact with the material 6 by means of a hinge 3 to the position shown by dotted lines. These are just two examples and it will be understood by those skilled in the art that any suitable method of moving the applicator may be utilised.

[0018] Applicators 1 can be arranged in rows on either side of the web of material 6 with a separate applicator for each stage of the process. Alternatively there may be more than one applicator for each stage of the process. The solutions may be applied separately or in sequence. It is also envisaged that the same applicator 1 may be used for all the solutions required in the process.

[0019] Figure 2 illustrates a possible arrangement of applicators to effect various process cycles. In this embodiment a plurality of applicators 1, a to i are arranged in series along the length of the material 6. Each applicator is supplied with processing solution as described above. The applicators may be supplied with the same or different processing solutions. For example, applicators a, b and c may be supplied with colour developer solution, applicators d, e and f may be supplied with bleach-fix solution and applicators g, h and i may be supplied with stabiliser or wash solution. In this embodiment the web of material moves backwards and forwards as shown by the arrow over an overflow tray 5 as described above. The applicators are fixed and it is the backwards and forwards movement of the material which

provides the required agitation and mixing.

[0020] To achieve good agitation and mixing the applicators should pass along the length of the web of material in contact with the surface of the material at a rate of between one length every five seconds to ten lengths per second. Preferably the rate is between one length every two seconds to five lengths per second. It has been found that the optimum rate to minimise seasoning effects is one sweep along the length of material per second. Of course it may be that the applicators are fixed and the web of material moves backwards and forwards as described above. If both the material and the applicators move the speed of the applicators should be faster or slower than the speed of the material.

[0021] There can be as many or as few applicator stages as required. Applicator stages can be skipped by moving the applicator heads out of contact with the material or spare applicators can be ready to bring into contact with the material. Therefore it is possible to instantly change the process cycle or the entire process. Small changes can be made to the process cycle by adding or removing one or more applicators per stage in the process. Small changes in the development time for example are very useful for improving the performance of certain films which might be marginal in the desired process. Thus after a film type has been detected from its bar code it is possible to fine-tune the sensitometry of the film instantly by resetting the applicator pattern.

[0022] Figure 3 illustrates an embodiment of the invention..

[0023] The applicator illustrated in figure 3 is provided with a sliding collar 11, movable along a guide rail 10. The applicator can therefore be moved backwards and forwards to the position shown by dotted lines.

Example 1

[0024] In this example Flexicolor C-41 developer replenisher LORR was applied to the surface of Kodacolor VR200 film using the method outlined as described with respect to figure 3. The film was placed on a heated metal block (37.8°C) for the developer-replenisher stage for only 3 minutes 15 seconds and the rest of the process of bleach, fix and wash was completed as shown in the process cycle below. The volume of developer-replenisher used was 4ml per linear foot (13ml per linear metre) of 35mm film. The same film was also processed in a deep tank sinkline C-41 reference process at 37.8°C. The process cycle was as follows.

Process cycle

[0025]

Developer	3 minutes 15 seconds
Bleach	3 minutes 15 seconds
fix	4 minutes 30 seconds
wash	3 minutes
dry	in air

where the developer is Flexicolor C-41 LORR, the bleach is Flexicolor Bleach III NR and the fix is Flexicolor C-41B fixer.

[0026] The results are shown in table 1.

Table 1

Surface application compared with deep tank C-41

Process	Speed			Gamma			Dmin			Dmax		
	R	G	B	R	G	B	R	G	B	R	G	B
C-41 reference	340	350	357	0.66	0.74	0.86	0.16	0.45	0.70	1.73	2.17	2.7
Surface method	337	348	342	0.67	0.84	1.01	0.18	0.40	0.67	1.41	1.86	2.4

[0027] It can be seen that speed, Gamma and Dmin are quite close to the reference process but Dmax is slightly low of aim which is due to seasoning products from the film. This demonstrates the principle of the method and indicates that a slight reformulation of the developer replenisher composition is necessary to compensate for the low Dmax.

Example 2

[0028] In this example the method is used to apply a processing solution which is relatively unstable in its mixed state but will allow very rapid processing. The processing solution is made just prior to processing by mixing two stable parts together. The processing solution is employed in the form of a "single-use mode" and was applied to the film surface by the method outlined as described with respect to figure 3. Thus the solution for processing in a particular stage or part of a stage is contained entirely in the porous applicator. A developer formula shown in Table 2 was used.

Table 2

Developer composition	
Component	Concentration
Na ₃ PO ₄ .12H ₂ O	50g/l
IPSHA	10g/l
CD4	10g/l
KBr	8g/l
KOH	11.5g/l
pH	13.2
Tween 80	10 drops/l

where IPSHA is N-iso-propyl-N-sulfoethyl hydroxylamine, CD4 is 4-amino-3-methyl-N-ethyl-N-(hydroxyethyl)aniline sulphate and Tween 80 is a commercially available surfactant.

[0029] This can be made by mixing all the components except the CD4 as part A with CD4 as part B.

Component	Part A	Part B
Na ₃ PO ₄	52g/l	-
IPSHA	10.4g/l	-
CD4	-	250g/l
K ₂ SO ₃	-	13g/l
KBr	8.3g/l	-
KOH	12.0g/l	-
pH	13.3	-
Tween 80	10 drops/l	-

where 4ml of Part B is added to 100ml of Part A.

[0030] It is also possible to make a concentrated form of Part A and then add Parts A and B to water.

[0031] A colour negative film(No. 1) was laid on a heated block(50° C) with the emulsion side face-up and developer solution was applied by means of a porous applicator. A known volume of developer solution(2ml per linear foot or 6.6ml per linear metre of 35mm film) was metered onto the porous applicator before it was used and both the developer solution and the applicator were unheated. The porous applicator was applied to one end of the film and was moved backwards and forwards at 1 cycle per second to spread the solution along the entire length of the film. The porous applicator head consisted of foam covered with very fine mohair. The porous applicator releases solution when squeezed and so the pressure on it was controlled by means of adjustable height guides on which the applicator moved. After the development time was completed a second porous applicator with an acetic acid solution which stopped development was used and subsequently the film strip was bleached and fixed in a normal processing tank using C-41 bleach and fix and then washed for two minutes. The developer solution and the porous applicator were designed for rapid processing and the results for a 15 second development time are shown in Figure 4.

[0032] In Figure 4 it can be seen that there is a quite close sensitometric match between the C-41 process with a development time of 195 seconds and the rapid process with a development time of 15 seconds. A number of advantages arise from the method:

[0033] The invention allows a considerable shortening of development time compared with the reference process.

[0034] The method allows the use of a developer formulation which is not very stable if left in a processing tank but in the invention the developer is made just before use from stable concentrates and so stability is no longer a concern. This is not possible in a deep-tank processor because of the relatively large volume(for example, the smallest Kodak SM minilab has a developer tank of 3.5 litres) involved and the considerable wastage if a tank has to be dumped.

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[0035] The small volume used per unit length of film (6.6ml per linear metre) in the method of the invention is in fact lower than the volume of replenisher (12.87 ml per linear metre; ("Using Kodak SM Chemicals in SM Minilabs") used in a conventional deep-tank minilab processing machine for the same amount of film.

Example 3

[0036] In this example colour paper(Ektacolor Edge 7) was processed using the porous applicator. The complete process was carried-out using porous applicators for each stage and the process cycle was as follows.

Process cycle

[0037]

Develop	10 seconds
Bleach-fix	10 seconds
Wash	4 x 5 seconds

[0038] The paper strips (1ft), approx 30.5mm, were placed on a heated block(55 ° C) and the developer solution was metered onto the applicator at 2ml/ft or 6.6ml/metre. The porous applicator was moved over the paper at 1 cycle per second and both the developer solution and the applicator were unheated.

[0039] The developer composition used is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Developer composition	
K ₂ CO ₃	33 g/l
IPSHA	10 g/l
CD3	10g/l
REU	2g/l
Tween 80	10drops
pH	10.6

where IPSHA is isopropyl sulphoethyl hydroxylamine. REU is Phorwite REU a commercially available optical brightener. CD3 is N-[2-(4-amino-N-ethyl-m-toluidino)ethyl]-methanesulphonamide sesquisulphate hydrate.

[0040] The bleach-fix used was Ektacolor Pro Bleach-fix replenisher. The wash consisted of four applicators which were immersed for 5 seconds in wash-water at 80° C and then applied to the paper surface in sequence for a total wash-time of 20 seconds. The result is shown in Figure 5.

[0041] It can be seen that there is a close match of the sensitometry for the paper processed with the porous applicator with that of the reference process RA-Prime. The total process time for RA-Prime is 180 seconds and the total process time for the porous applicator is 40 seconds.

Example 4

[0042] In this example low silver colour paper containing 8mg/sq.ft(86mg/sq.m) was processed in an RX or amplification method using the porous applicator. Conventional colour paper has about 50 to 60 mg/sq.ft (530 to 645mg/sq.m). The processing solution compositions are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Processing solution composition					
Developer Composition		Amplifier Composition		Fixer composition	
KOH(solid)	20g/l	H ₂ O ₂ (30%)	20ml/l	Na ₂ SO ₃	50g/l
IPSHA(solid)	10g/l	Photoflow	2.5ml/l		
CD3(solid)	10g/l				
Photoflow	2.5ml/l				

[0043] 1 ml of a particular solution was pipetted onto the porous applicator and spread evenly over the pad by rolling

the pipette over the surface. The pad was then applied to the surface of the paper which was clipped to the surface of a level coating block. The paint pad was moved at 1-2 cps backwards and forwards over the paper surface. The developer was applied first then the amplifier with a separate applicator for each solution. The fixer was in a 500ml measuring cylinder. Fixing was for 2 minutes. Strips were then washed for 3 minutes.

Strip Number	Details
1	15 sec developer (1ml) no amplifier (23° C)
2	15 sec developer (1ml), then 20 sec amplifier (1ml) (23° C)

Results						
Strip number	Dmax Densityx100			Dmin Densityx100		
	R	G	B	R	G	B
1	63	66	71	9.8	11.2	10.5
2	243	200	138	10.9	12.2	11.2

[0044] The results show that amplification has occurred compared with a strip not treated with the amplifier. The blue Dmax density is low which indicates that further formula optimisation is needed or a higher temperature is needed.

[0045] Figures 6 and 7 and 8 illustrate further embodiments of the invention in which the web of material follows a rotary path.

[0046] In this embodiment the material 6 is wrapped around and carried on a bobbin 21. The material, in this example film, is attached to the bobbin 21 and is rotated with it. The bobbin includes a cam 24. Two applicators 15 are shown, for applying two different solutions. Each applicator 15 is carried on a carriage 7. The relative pressure of the applicator on the film is controlled by the carriage 7 which has locating pins 12, 13 running on a guide rail 14 under the action of a spring 14. Each applicator 15 is located by means of a bracket with a pin 8 which passes through a locating hole of the applicator shaft 9. The applicator can easily be removed or changed by lifting the pin. The applicators can be withdrawn or engaged on demand by, for example, use of an electrically operated mechanism.

[0047] As the bobbin 21 and film 6 rotate the cam 24 pushes on carriage 7 and lifts the applicator 15 clear of the ends of the film and attachment means and thus avoids damage to the film and uneven processing. This is shown in figure 7, the applicator 15 being pushed clear of the bobbin 21 by the cam 24 pushing the carriage 7 back against the spring 16. The carriage cannot return the applicator to its working position until the cam is clear.

[0048] It will be understood that a plurality of applicators may be accommodated by the enlargement of the diameter of the bobbin 21.

[0049] Figures 8a and 8b illustrate how a plurality of applicators 15 may be attached to a central hub 20 for easy storage and selection. Figure 8a shows a plan view of a plurality of applicators for selection. Each applicator is attached to the end of an arm, the other end of which is attached to the central hub, all lying within the same plane. As each applicator is required an actuator 22 simply pushes it out of the plane into contact with the surface of the material to be processed, as shown in figure 8b.

[0050] As can be understood from the detailed description the present invention provides a method of processing in which good mixing of a limited amount of processing solution is achieved. It is particularly suitable for "single use" chemistry where the solution is not reused. The process cycle can be varied almost instantly by changing the number of applicators for a given stage of the process by moving the applicators in and out of contact with the surface of the web of material being processed. The process cycle can be changed any combination of times consistent with completing the process.

[0051] The invention is particularly applicable to "single" use application where a fixed volume of solution is applied to the surface of the material. By moving the applicator backwards and forwards along the length of the material good agitation is provided at the same time as good uniformity.

[0052] The method can be used for paper and film processing in a single processor. The method can be used for any stage in a process cycle, for colour, black and white and reversal processing. The method can also be used in RX amplification or intensification processing.

[0053] The present invention has been described in detail with reference to preferred embodiments. It will be understood by those skilled in the art that variations and modifications may be effected within the scope of the invention.

Claims

1. A method of processing light sensitive material, the method comprising the steps of applying a fixed volume of processing solution to the surface of the material to be processed by means of at least one movable applicator and moving the applicator and the material relative to each other to enable mixing of the solution on the surface, the at least one applicator being movable from a position in contact with the material to a position out of contact with the material such that the process cycle can be varied.
2. A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the applicator is moved backwards and forwards along the length of the web of material.
3. A method as claimed in claim 2 wherein the applicator moves along the length of the material at a speed ranging from one length every five seconds to ten lengths per second.
4. A method as claimed in claim 3 wherein the applicator moves along the length of the material at a speed ranging from one length every two seconds to five lengths per second.
5. A method as claimed in claim 4 wherein the applicator moves along the length of the material at a speed of one length per second.
6. A method as claimed in any preceding claim wherein the applicator is moved into and out of contact with the material by extension and retraction means.
7. A method as claimed in any of claims 1 to 5 wherein the applicator is moved into and out of contact with the material by hinge means.
8. A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the web of material is moved in a rotary manner.
9. A method as claimed in any preceding claim wherein the processing solution supplied to the at least one applicator is changed in a predetermined sequence throughout the process cycle.
10. An apparatus for processing light sensitive material, the apparatus comprising at least one movable applicator for applying a fixed volume of processing solution to the surface of the material to be processed, means for moving the applicator and the material relative to each other to enable mixing of the solution on the surface, and means for moving the at least one applicator from a position in contact with the material to a position out of contact with the material such that the process cycle can be varied.
11. An apparatus as claimed in claim 10 wherein the applicator is movable along the length of the material.
12. An apparatus as claimed in claim 10 or 11 wherein extension and retraction means are provided for moving the applicator into and out of contact with the material.
13. An apparatus as claimed in claim 10 or 11 wherein hinge means are provided for moving the applicator into and out of contact with the material.
14. An apparatus as claimed in claim 10 wherein a rotary means are provided for moving the web of material.
15. An apparatus as claimed in any of claims 10 to 14 wherein the applicator includes a pad of absorbent material.

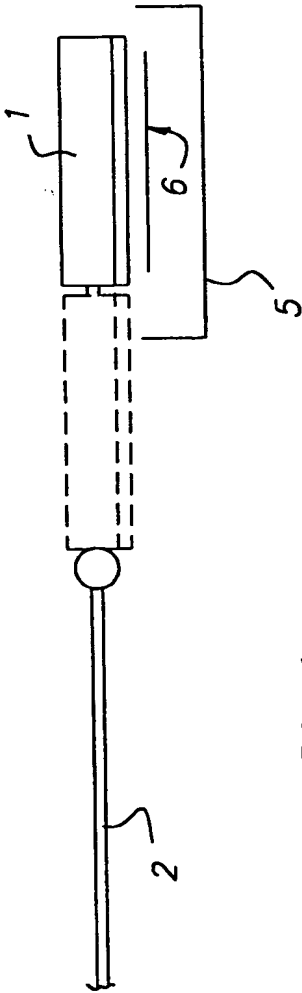


FIG. 1a

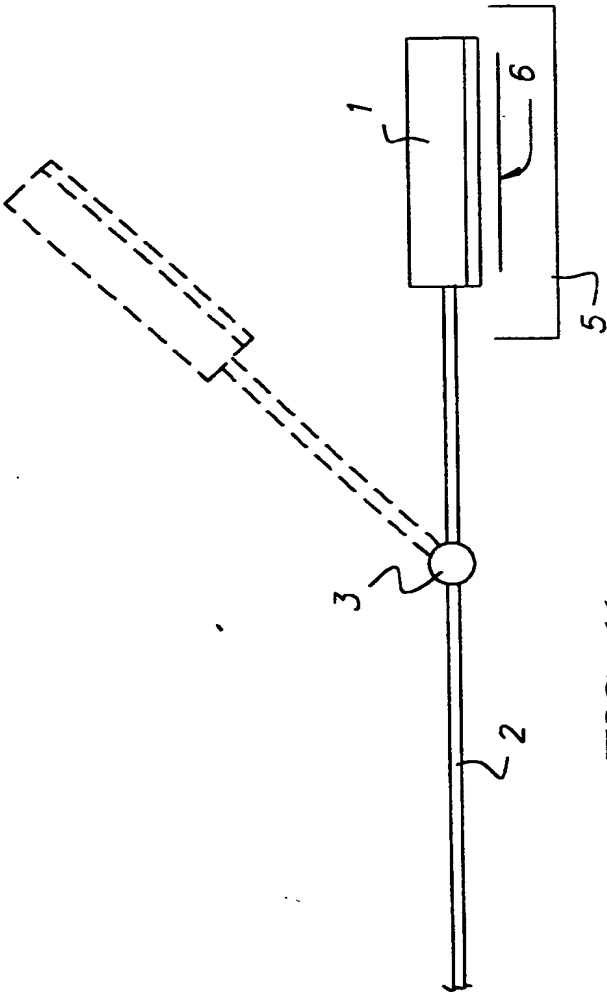
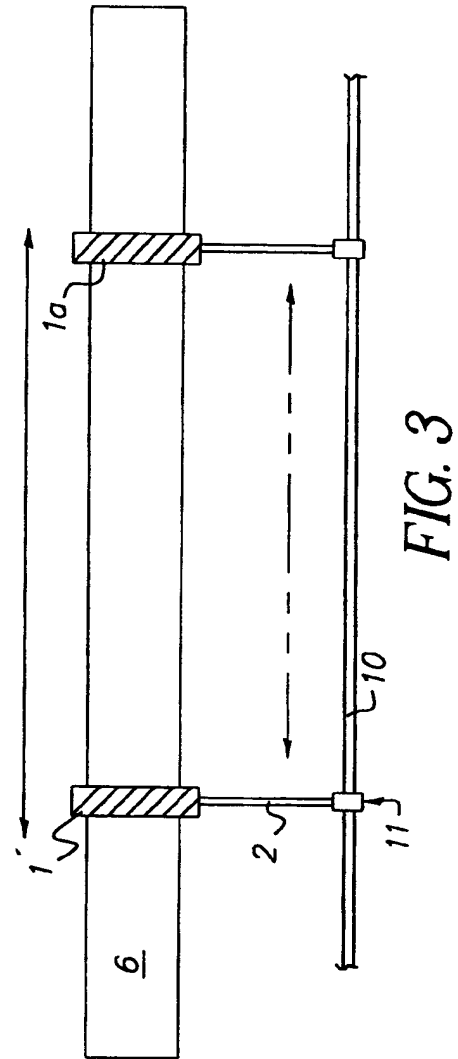
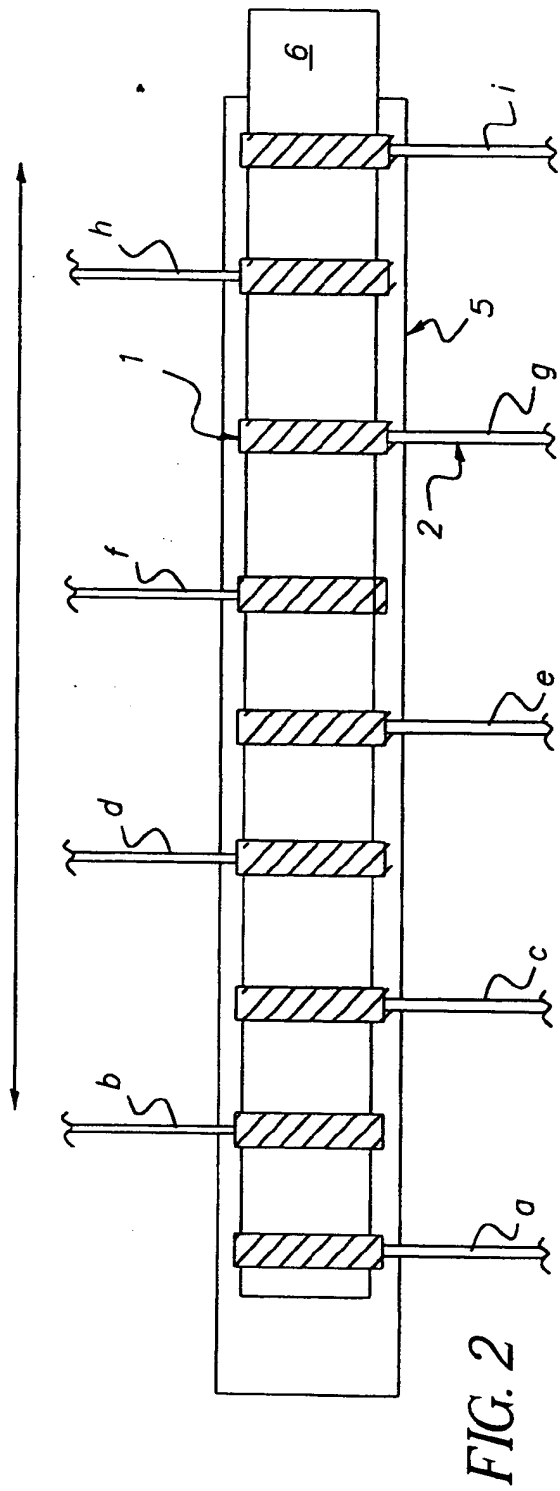


FIG. 1b



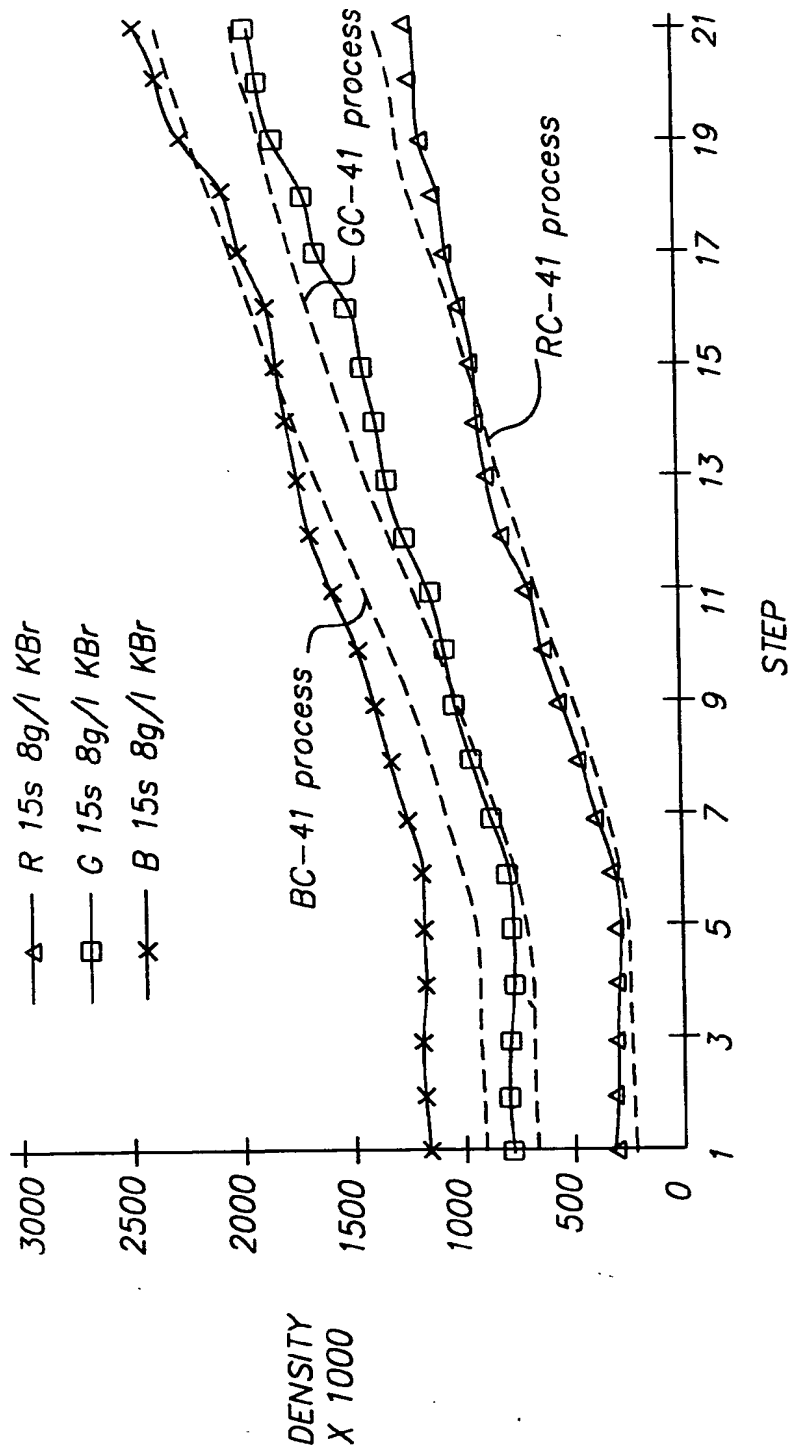


FIG. 4

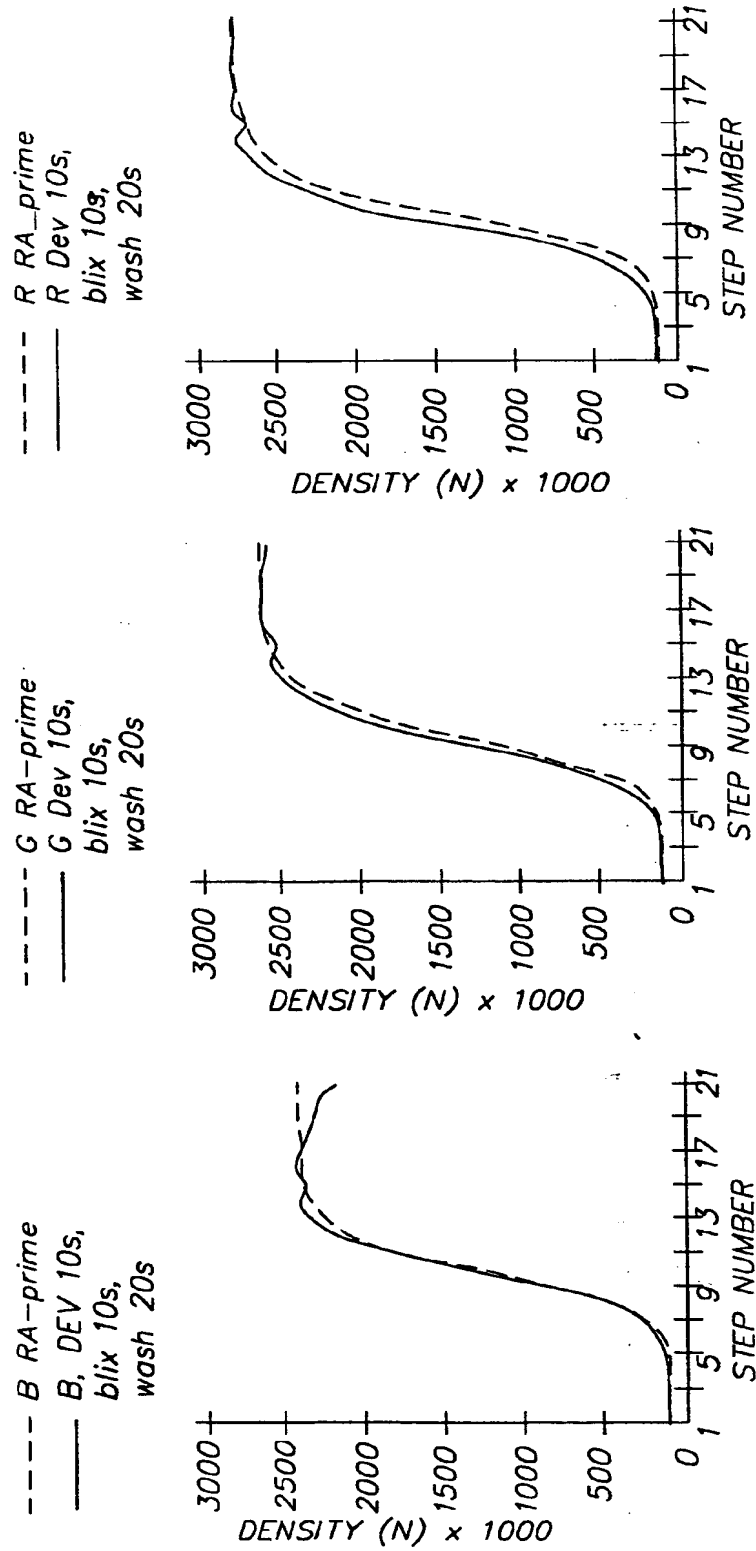


FIG. 5

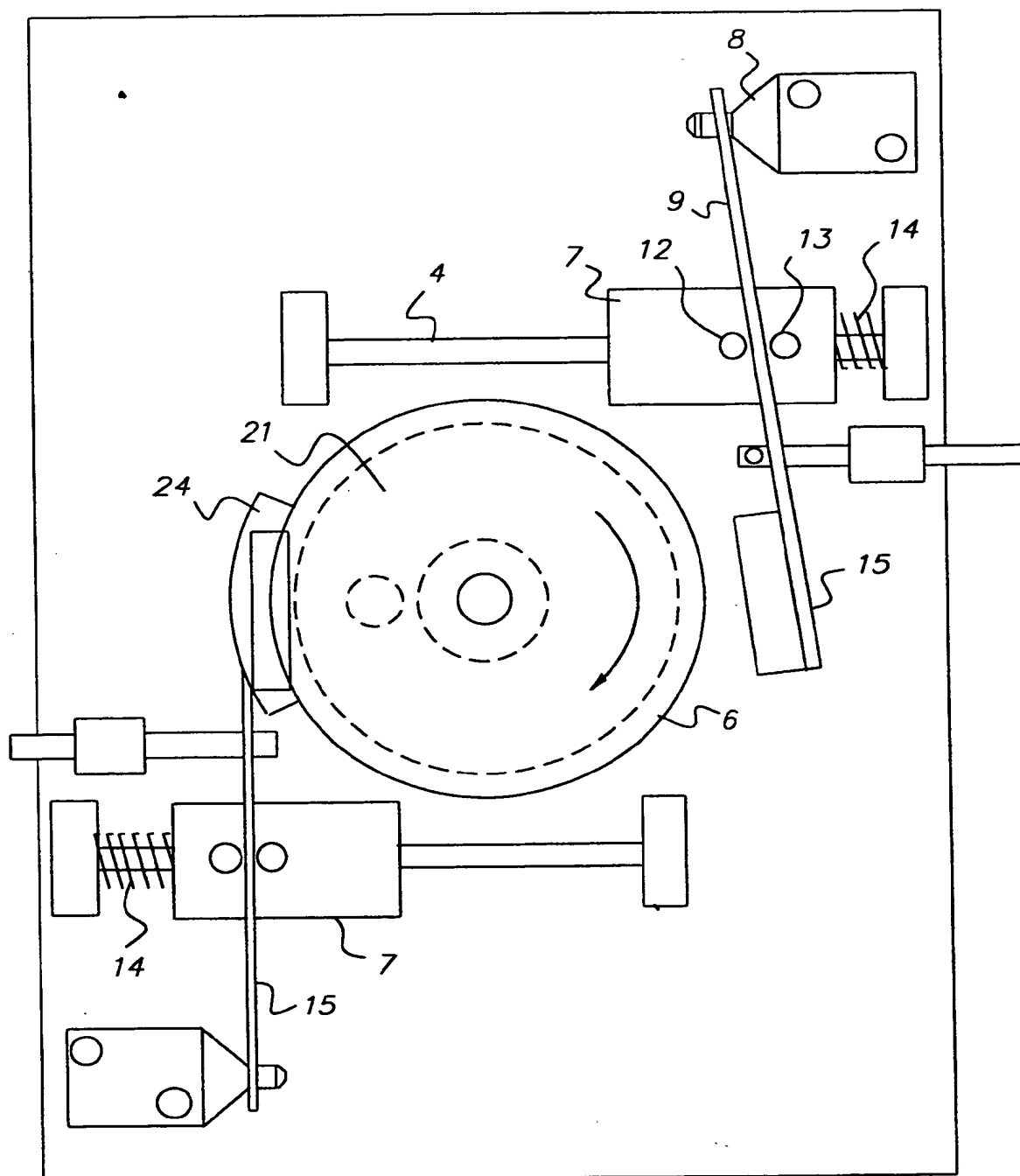


FIG. 6

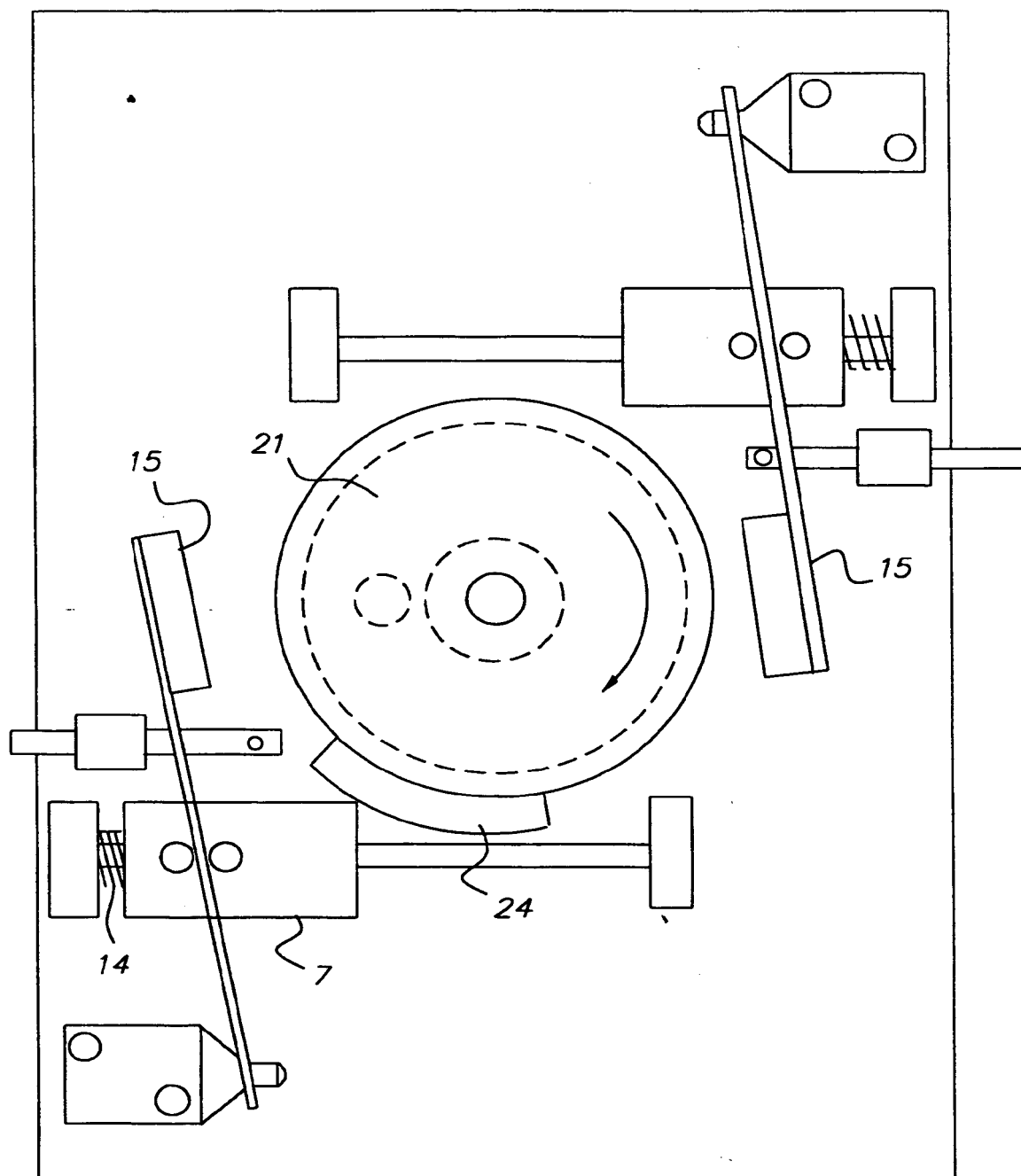


FIG. 7

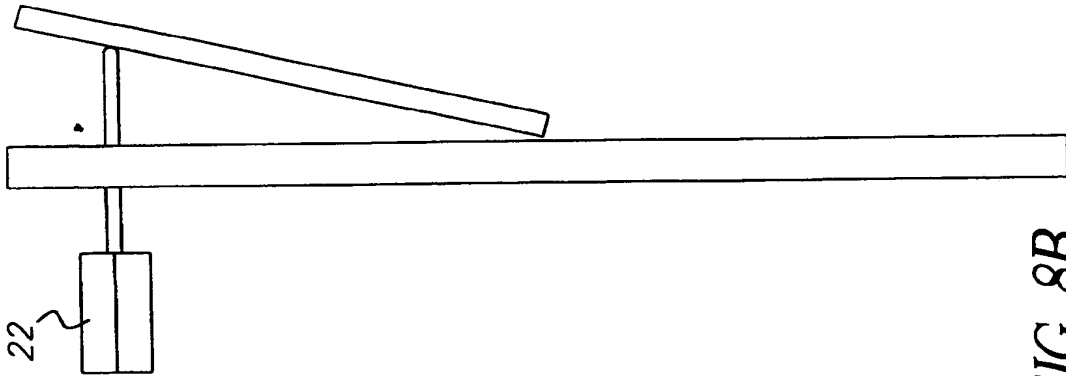


FIG. 8B

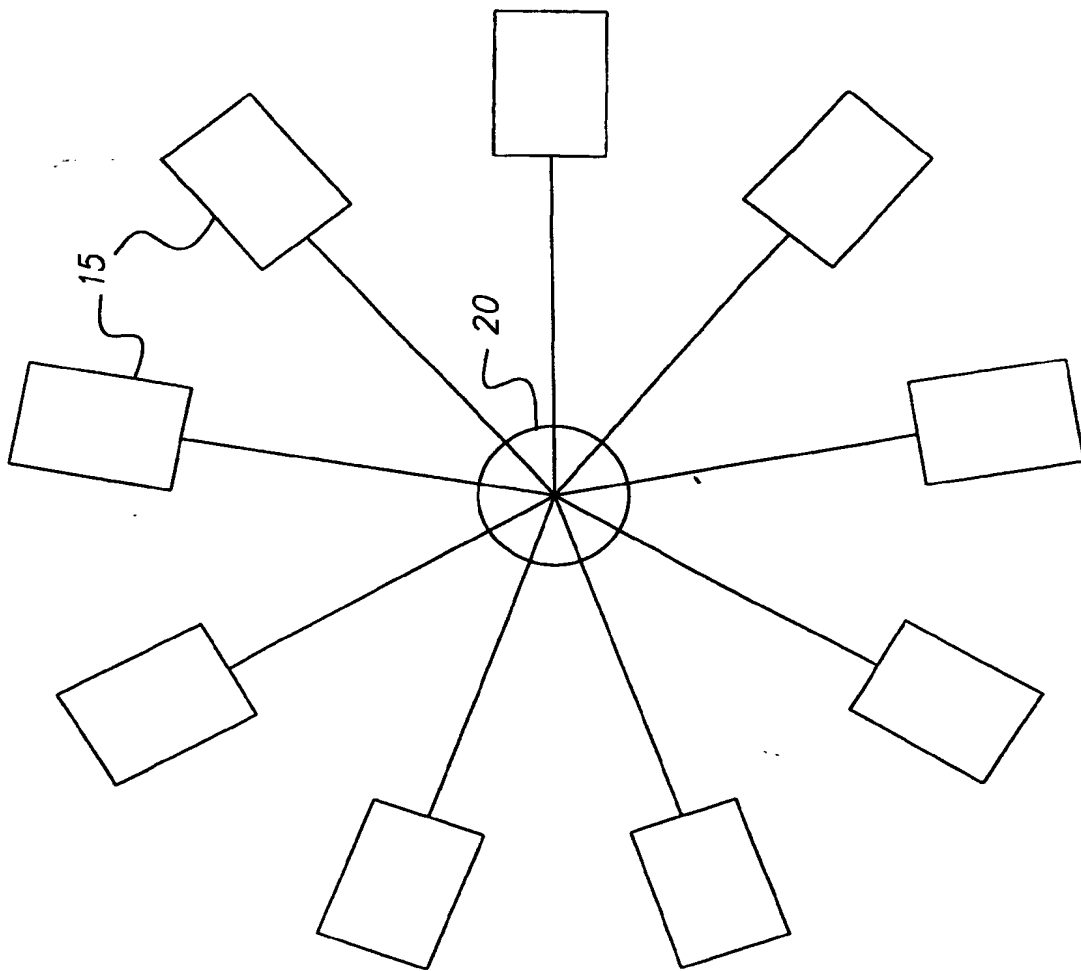


FIG. 8A



European Patent
Office

EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 00 20 4540

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT			
Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int.Cl.7)
X	US 3 461 787 A (PFAFF WILLIAM A) 19 August 1969 (1969-08-19) * abstract * * column 2, line 56 - column 3, line 10; figures 1-5 *	1,6,9, 10,12,15	603C5/26 603D5/06
X	US 5 357 305 A (LONG FRANCIS C) 18 October 1994 (1994-10-18) * column 3, line 45 - column 4, line 8; figures 1-3 *	1,6,10, 15	
X	GB 1 035 085 A (EASTMAN KODAK CO) 6 July 1966 (1966-07-06) * claims 1-10; figures 1-6 *	1,10	
X	US 5 625 856 A (KOHDA HIROYUKI ET AL) 29 April 1997 (1997-04-29) * column 6, line 57 - column 7, line 15 * * column 1, line 55 - column 2, line 15 *	10	
X	US 3 593 641 A (LUKASIK FERDINAND ET AL) 20 July 1971 (1971-07-20) * column 2, line 43 - line 71 *	1,10	TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.7)
A	BE 357 195 A (D. FRIEDLANDER) 28 February 1929 (1929-02-28) * claim 1 *	1	603C 603D
The present search report has been drawn up for all claims			
Place of search THE HAGUE		Date of completion of the search 27 March 2001	Examiner Bolger, W
CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document		T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons & : member of the same patent family, corresponding document	

EPO FORM 1803 03 82 (P04C01)

**ANNEX TO THE EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT
ON EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION NO.**

EP 00 20 4540

This annex lists the patent family members relating to the patent documents cited in the above-mentioned European search report.
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27-03-2001

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